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MANNING ISSUES FOR THE NEW MILLENNIUM: SHAPING A COMPREHENSIVE RECRUITING & RETENTION STRATEGY FOR THE CANADIAN FORCES

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Both Mr. Tethong and Mr. Ankersen, in their recent article *Retain or Perish: Why Recruiting Won't Save the CF* (Datalink #95), raise some interesting points about manning issues. They do, however, infer that the Canadian Forces sees recruiting as its saviour and that we have not adequately assessed associated human resources (HR) challenges from a holistic perspective. This is simply not the case. The CF does not believe recruiting is a stand-alone issue; nor will it be the panacea to all our manning problems. They suggest that retention is a greater issue, more deserving of immediate attention. Undeniably, retention is an important element in optimizing manpower within the CF. However, both recruiting and retention are but components of the HR challenge for which we have developed a harmonized and integrated long- term strategy.

The CF faces a myriad of challenges in successfully manning, employing and developing its Regular and Reserve Forces in the 21st Century. If it is to be the "employer of choice", it must contend with the pressures of a shrinking labour market, a strong economy that gives Canadians greater choice in career opportunities, and, most important, some accommodation of changing societal values. This does not imply the suspension of honoured traditions and the military's ethos, but it does mean the CF must welcome a critical review of its policies and programs. The CF has recognized these imperatives and over the last several years has instituted a number of HR projects to proactively address these issues. Recruiting and Retention are key elements of this program. This article will provide readers with insight into these projects and the CF strategy to meet the many HR challenges.

Magnitude of the Recruiting Problem

The Canadian Forces employs approximately 80,000 people (Regular and Reserve) in over 105 military occupations. Members serve as infantry, sailors, plumbers, carpenters, computer analysts and cover almost every job description found in Canada. Over the past decade, the CF has experienced a persistent reduction in the number of applicants per job ratio. Where at one time 3.3 people applied for every position, the ratio has now dropped below two. In addition, the CF has become more sophisticated: computers are used in every occupation and state of the art equipment requires highly trained people to both operate and maintain our vehicles, ships, planes and weapons systems. We seek applicants with either the requisite skill sets or the aptitude to learn them. Unfortunately, the public and private sectors are pursuing these same people. Additionally, the labour market is growing more slowly than the predicted demand for the next two decades. Finally, there has been a tremendous increase in the types of employment packages offered to recruit and retain people.

The CF offers lucrative retirement plans. This can be a double-edged sword in that although they have an intrinsic attraction value, they also make it easy for people to leave after they have served the requisite number of years (20, 27 or 35). In 2004, the CF will experience a large number of members reaching retirement age.

Is There a Retention Strategy?

Several articles have criticized the CF for placing greater effort on recruiting when retention is the more pressing problem. In response, our recruiting program is but one part

of a comprehensive and integrated HR solution. The CF has a long-term strategy that embraces the entire portfolio of HR initiatives. As a companion to the Recruiting Project, we have also instituted the Retention Project focused on developing coordinated strategies and programs to retain our skilled and experienced men and women. More details on this project will be provided later. It is worth noting that one of the areas of concern for us at the moment is "corporate raiding." We are experiencing increased focus by other government departments, industry, police forces and even our Allies who see the CF as a large pool of highly skilled, well trained and professional people.

During a series of annual military occupational reviews (AMORs), attended by a broad array of experienced officers and non-commissioned member (NCM) advisers, recruiting was raised as the number one concern for the health of military occupations. These advisers portrayed that the greatest frustration among members is the shortage of people and the demand on those serving to "pick up the slack." In other words, if we do not solve the recruiting problem, fill up the training schools and ensure people are employed quickly, we will experience greater attrition.

Manpower Shortages as A Consequence of Recruiting Shortfalls

The present shortages of personnel are largely a consequence of the CF's difficulty in recruiting and enrolling the requisite numbers of people. During the past three years, we have fallen short of targets. Given that it takes an average of 18 months to train a soldier, sailor or airman and up to seven years to train an officer, it was essential that we develop an integrated recruiting solution to ensure CF operational effectiveness for the future.

The CF depends on a regular annual intake of recruits to be cycled through a myriad of training programs. Firstly, each member must accept the concept of "unlimited liability" in that he/she can be placed "in harm's way" during the performance of duties - be it peacekeeping in the Balkans, or fighting the Red River floods. Consequently, the CF must invest considerable time and resources in providing the unique military training to ensure each member is fully prepared. Secondly, all members are enrolled in a trade, and they must be trained to acquire the attendant skill sets.

In summary, the Canadian Forces must successfully attract, train and recruit the appropriate numbers of personnel. However, it will take several years before the slow process of recovery on manning shortfalls of operational units, ships and squadrons takes effect.

So What Is Wrong With Our Recruiting?

We have conducted an intensive review of all our recruiting programs and processes. We invited recruiters, training staffs and career advisers to recommend improvements. Additionally, external agencies were asked to measure our program, and a major study was commissioned to assess the utility and effectiveness of our overall recruiting system.

The results clearly demonstrated that we needed immediate action. The CF was not attractive as a career choice for young Canadian men and women, whether they were just entering the workforce or were skilled and experienced Canadians seeking other career opportunities. Additionally, the CF's recruiting process was too bureaucratic and required major reform. Equally, our advertising and marketing approach was not well aligned with the expectations and values of society. With a declining applicant base and repeated shortfalls in recruiting targets, the CF faced a severe challenge. Our research also indicated that the problem would worsen by 2004 when many members reach compulsory retirement age or pass through retirement gates and accept early pensions. Our Recruiting Project has therefore become a top priority, alongside retention, health services reform, terms of service and other major HR initiatives. The CF has actively researched and analyzed the labour market, demographics, social trends, immigration, and economic models as indicators of manpower challenges for the next twenty years. Additionally, our analysts studied the recruiting and retention strategies of industry, and other armed forces, as well as the plethora of HR research on various recruiting strategies and approaches.

The Recruiting Strategy

Recruiting is a multifaceted program that must take into account a compendium of variables, factors and considerations. Firstly, we had to develop a solution that achieved balance. To bring in too many people over a short period would, indeed, overwhelm resources. Consequently, we devised a Strategic Recruiting and Production Plan which incorporated three years of surge recruiting at approximately 7,000 regular force recruits and 4,000 reserve force recruits annually. Through operational research, we also developed the steady state recruiting requirement. Secondly, recruiting staffs were augmented. Both the Army and Navy also formed recruiting liaison staffs to help with the unique needs of their occupations. Thirdly, the CF developed an expanded advertising campaign. It was not, as some suggest, simply a flashy series of advertisements, but rather a shaped program in response to a series of focus

groups. The advertising addresses the needs of the Army, Navy, Air Force and our Reserves. It is, we believe, an accurate depiction of what life in the CF is about and the career opportunities offered in service to one's country, and indeed in support of the global humanitarian ambitions shared by most Canadians. Fourthly, the CF conducted an intensive review of the entire recruiting process. It has reduced bureaucracy while retaining those key "filter" mechanisms essential to safeguard national security and to ensure members have the mental and physical aptitude to succeed in their chosen profession. The suggestion that the CF has lowered standards is inaccurate. While some aptitude percentiles have been amended to reflect sociological norms - the standards for both basic recruit training and advanced trades courses remain unchanged. In other words, even if someone slips through the recruit applicant process, they must pass all established training standards. All three Services will provide training programs for recruits until renovations to the CF Recruit School are completed in 2002. A significant point of discussion and concern was to ensure there was no lowering of training standards. There will not be. Finally, the CF has embarked on a major program of recognizing equivalent training and skill sets. In the past, the Forces had a policy of "Growing one's own trades", in that we attracted unskilled people and provided them with all of the requisite training. While the CF must continue to provide specialized military training, it will accept a greater number of civilian equivalencies. We have completed an intensive review of our most critical 17 high skilled trades (auto mechanics, X Ray Technicians, Computer Administrators, Communications Specialists, etc.) and will grant equivalencies, including time in rank and time toward promotion for those who enter with specialized skills. These members can by-pass much or all of our CF trades training and become immediately employable. It is also worth noting that the CF is devising innovative and effective recruiting incentives to be competitive with industry.

The Retention Strategy

We agree with Mr. Tethong and Mr. Ankersen that something also has to be done about attrition, but we are not hemorrhaging as they claim. Our analysis of voluntary attrition patterns in recent years shows that we have been losing about 4% of CF strength, or 2,300 people per year, on members' request. We observe that voluntary attrition varies by occupation and years of service - occurring early in some, later in others. Reasons for leaving are also highly variable, but our analysis of over 3,500 exit questionnaires (note reliable sample size) has helped us pin down some common issues: poor person-occupation fit and a desire to return to school for early-career leavers (this is not unusual among young people testing the world of work); time away from home and family separations for mid-career leavers (these are operational tempo and personnel tempo issues); and better career prospects, family stability, and capitalization on early pension for late-career leavers (demographic unavoidables for some long-service personnel).

Because we do not believe that there is any such thing as a magic bullet for the several reasons people leave the CF, a variety of policy and program initiatives are being implemented or are on the way to counter the noted contingencies: improved in-service educational opportunities and reimbursement programs, a personnel tempo review to control <u>all</u> time away from home (overseas deployments and training courses), changes to Regular Force terms of service and Reserve Force employment policies to foster longer service. In concert with ongoing quality of life initiatives and compensation and benefits and improvements, we hope to make an effect at the corporate-policy level. This will not be enough in all cases. Some occupations, especially those with high-demand skills, will also require get-well programs tailored to the exigencies of specific labour markets.

While there is still much to be done, a broad array of HR projects has already accomplished a good deal to improve the quality of working life in the CF and the attractiveness of continued service.

A Balanced Human Resources Program

The CF has developed a balanced approach to all of its Human Resource issues. Its recent Long-Term Capability Plan (Human Resources) integrates and harmonizes all projects and programs designed to address HR challenges. Recruiting, retention, quality of life, health services review, reserve employment, terms of reference and professional development are not independent activities. They are developed, shaped and implemented in a holistic fashion. We are confident this strategy will maximize success and ensure high operational effectiveness.

Don't Give Up

Mr. Ankersen and Mr. Tethong encourage the CF not to give up. We have no such intention. More important, we would have welcomed Mr. Ankersen and Mr. Tethong in a discussion of the subjects had they asked. The issues are, indeed, complex, and it is important that everyone is afforded the opportunity to explore all of the issues. HR strategies for the 21st Century are the top priority of the Minister of National Defence and the Chief of Defence

Staff. The HR program has a comprehensive and integrated long-term plan. It is well-resourced and positioned to both champion and pioneer HR solutions. This will ensure that we look after our people, invest in them and give them the confidence in their futures.

Executive Director's note: In keeping with Col Grant's invitation (above) to discuss this matter, the Institute asked Messrs. Ankersen and Tethong to respond.

Our original article was aimed at creating dialogue with the government on an issue of great importance: the long-term health of the Canadian Forces. We chose to begin that dialogue in a public forum, as this would be the best way to foster a critical public examination of the CF's recruiting and retention policies. Given Col Grant's formal response, we have at least partially succeeded in our aim. Still, based on the statements, policies, and (rather bureaucratic) responses we have seen to date, it is unlikely that the CF will succeed in winning the war for talent.

There appears to be little in the way of a clearly-articulated human resources plan linking the key issues of recruitment and retention. The issues are treated in isolation and are poorly prioritised. Colonel Grant feels that we have inferred that there is no integrated policy. He is correct. This inference stems from the fact that no such plan has been put before the public, and from our first-hand knowledge of the lack of interest in matters relating to retention.

The crux of the matter is this: the war for talent will not be won by sheer numbers. Victory will be achieved by *attracting and retaining* first-rate people. An emphasis on the quantitative aspects of the problem ignores the fact that those who are leaving are well-trained, experienced personnel that cannot be replaced easily. While this may seem obvious, the CF appears to put little value on retention at all. As evidenced by Col Grant's reply, there is a systemic bias against trying to retain any but the most specialised of military occupations. One explanation for the fact that "recruiting was raised as the number one concern for the health of military occupations" is that senior NCMs and officers see measures aimed and retaining individuals as contrary to the established culture. Those personnel taking their release are seen as beyond hope and beyond reach! Therefore the only possible solution is recruiting. Take for example the finding that people leave the CF for a wide variety of reasons (see **The Retention Strategy**, page 3) all of which seem to be outside the CF human resources system's control. Why are these problems accepted and not solved? Why are poor occupation fits not resolved before the person opts to leave the organisation? Why is leaving to pursue education seen as a given? Offering in-house education or partial reimbursement for extra-service academic pursuits does constitute a serious attempt at keeping people in the CF. This assumption - that people are going to leave regardless - has been discredited and dealt with in other organizations. The private sector is finding creative ways in which to reduce turn-over because keeping employees is cheaper, more sustainable and yields better results than looking for new ones. In the CF, attrition has been virtually ignored as a factor contributing to personnel shortages. For example, DND attributes the current shortage to "a declining applicant base and repeated shortfalls in recruiting targets". Clearly, it has been easier to blame the 'new economy' than accept that at least some of the people that have left have done so due to troubles within the CF.

People are attracted to military life because it offers a unique set of challenges and opportunities. The CF must be willing to grow and change in order to ensure that this remains the case, since job satisfaction becomes more critical over the long term. Ignoring those who are leaving and focussing on recruiting is not good enough. Any organization aspiring to be an "employer of choice" must do better.

Year	Personnel Intake	Attrition	Net Shortfall
1999/2000	1 800	3 100	1 300
2000/2001	2 500	3 700	1 200
2001/2002	3 000	5 500	2 500

Source: 'DND HR Mil sanctioned research' in Maj Jeff Tasseron 'Military Manning and the Revolution in Social Affairs' (unpublished, 2001) 18.

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